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By- Johnson, Wendell

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A brief statement of the purpose for the interviews of 35 faculty members outside the English department at Diablo Valley College concerning the improvement of student reading and writing skills is followed by a sampling of 10 questions used in conducting the interviews to discover teacher requirements, evaluation criteria, problems, involvement, interest, and suggestions. After noting general impressions, the paper proceeds to outline and discuss at some length the instructors' attitudes and practices. Recommendations for implementing the total faculty responsibility for language skills development conclude the report. (AF)

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SURVEY OF FACULTY ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES PERTAINING TO STUDENT READING AND WRITING

1967

The purpose of this survey was to discover: (1) what teachers outside of the English department require of students in reading and writing, (2) what criteria they use to evaluate their students' writing, (3) what reading and writing problems, if any, seem most serious, (4) what instruction teachers give students relevent to their reading and writing assignments, (5) how instructors outside the English department view their responsibility, if any, in the development of reading and writing skills, (6) whether they think there is a need for greater faculty-wide cooperation in improving these skills, and (7) general criticisms, and suggestions for further inquiry and experiment.

Thirty-five faculty members were interviewed from the following departments: social science, counseling, biology, chemistry, physical science, business, humanities, music, journalism and police science. In casting about for other perspectives, I interviewed the Dean of Instruction who was qualified to look at the problem both as an administrator and as a former teacher of speech and drama. I also asked John Bacich to approach the problem from the point of view of a creative writing teacher, Bill Sparke from the point of view of a journalist and author, and Bob Martincich from his interdisciplinary experience working with Bill DiPace on the "writing process."

After an initial explanation of the purposes of the inquiry, interviews were constructed around such questions as the following:

(1) how much writing, in papers and in tests, do you require?
(2) what kinds of topics are students asked to write about?
(3) what preparation do you give for the writing assignment (either essay exam or paper)? For instance, does the instructor take time to explain how the essay might be most effectively organized? Does the instructor hand out model student essays from previous classes? Does he point to any models from course readings that a student might follow in constructing his essay?
(4) how much reading is required of students?
(5) what methods are used to assist the student in reading? More specifically, does the instructor discuss the organization of the textbook? Does he discuss the process of reading for ideas in the literature of his particular discipline? Does he have any special methods for helping students master the vocabulary of the subject? Does he give students study questions as a reading aid?
(6) what significant difficulties do students have in reading and writing?
(7) does the instructor believe that he shares responsibility with the English department for developing reading and writing skills?
(8) if, in the course of the discussion, the requirements of one instructor appeared to be inconsistent with those of another instructor, the instructor was asked if he believed such divergence, or lack of re-enforcement, might constitute a problem. Examples: The English teacher penalizes the student for errors in English (spelling, sentence fragments, agreement, punctuation); an instructor in another department does not. A teacher in one course examines students closely on assigned reading; a teacher in another course does not.
(9) two hypothetical questions were asked: (a) if the results of this survey seemed to warrant the formation of an interdepartmental committee on reading and writing, would the instructor

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be willing to serve, and (b) if a feasible structure were developed, would he consider the possibility of cooperating in an experiment whereby a student in Chemistry 108, or Social Science 110, for instance, would not receive credit for that course until he had completed a unit of self-instructional work in the area of his reading-writing deficiency.

(10) Instructors were asked for any other suggestions or pertinent criticisms of existing practices.

Conclusions

Beyond the more specific conclusions about instructor attitudes and practices detailed below, several general but, I think, important impressions should be noted.

First, despite the fact that questions, and resultant discussion, were often quite pointed about an individual teacher's methods and grading standards, instructors were admirably open and cooperative in providing information and examining implications.

Second, although there was considerable frustration expressed about students' reading and writing capabilities, there was no cynicism.

Third, many of the teachers interviewed are intensely concerned about the reading and writing problem, particularly the former. We have in these people a resource of interest and ideas that should be tapped.

Fourth, I will strongly recommend (see Recommendations) that this survey and report be the first step in a campus-wide assault on college level literacy. But were nothing save this report ever to issue from my investigation this semester, I believe that the process of inquiry itself has been of significant value. Many teachers expressed explicit approval of the idea of the survey. They were discernibly glad to have a chance to talk to someone about an old and vexing problem. More than this, I think they found the necessity of articulating and, sometimes, defending their methods a stimulating one. (Interviews averaged 45 minutes to an hour. Several ran close to two hours; and these were good hours of intense communication, touching occasionally on something like hallowed ground.) At any rate I think there was something therapeutic in having an English teacher prowl around in those offices on the 'Hill' asking people what the hell they thought they were doing. I would suggest that it might be a good idea to have a science teacher return the favor. Some genuine dialogue, and that is not common in academe, did occur. For that, the Office of Instruction is to be congratulated. Let's hope we can find a way to sustain it.

1. Attitudes Expressed about Students' Reading

On the whole, more concern was expressed about students' difficulty in understanding what they read than about their writing deficiencies. This dissatisfaction was expressed with varying degrees of intensity but nearly every teacher expressed it. This, of course, is not news. I suppose teachers everywhere from elementary to graduate school, are dissatisfied with their students' achievements. If it were otherwise, they wouldn't be teaching and students wouldn't be studying.

But more than a natural pedagogical impatience seems to be at issue here. The disparity between instructors' expectations and students' performance, especially again in reading textbooks, has, in some cases, forced an undesirable change in teaching methods, and has, in some cases, made instructors skeptical about the efficacy of DVC educational premises.

One instructor said: "If we don't do something about the students who can't read, or <u>won't</u> read, the 'open door' idea is just a meaningless slogan."

Another said: "The greatest problem this department has is finding a text the students can read."

Another: "No, I don't assume my students know how to read. In fact, I've changed my whole approach because of their inability to understand the text. In my lectures, I give them all the essential ideas in the text. If they can't understand the text, perhaps they can at least understand me and get through the course."

And, this teacher felt that students came more and more to rely on explanation in class as a substitute for reading skill.

Another instructor: "If I assigned a chapter in the text and tested them simply on the main ideas, half the class would flunk. They read and then I explain to them what they've read. I shouldn't have to do that."

And another: "The text in this course is too difficult but we haven't been able to find a better one. So, frankly, I ignore it, or most of it." In response to a question: "Yes, a student could probably get a "C" in this course without 'cracking' the text."

A social science instructor: "Reading is a tremendous problem. No, I don't assume that because they're college students, they know how to read. I give them detailed study questions on every chapter."

How many students are handicapped by an inability to read for ideas? Responses to this question varied from "a significant number" to "at least fifty per cent of the class."

Vocabulary is a major problem. Instructors in biology, physical science and chemistry were particularly concerned about the paralyzing impact of scientific terminology. One instructor pointed to the first page of a text where several specialized terms were italicized: "Students take one look at this and go into a state of shock." This instructor believes that mastery of basic terminology in his subject, biology, is as fundamental as mastery of vocabulary in the study of a foreign language. In fact, he has a theory that students who have studied a foreign language are more willing and able to plunge into the vocabulary of biology. Which idea may hold promise for collaboration on method between foreign language and science teachers. (See Recommendations)

In general the strongest criticism of student reading abilities came from science teachers. In the view of one science instructor this might partly be explained by the fact that science teachers more consistently get direct evidence about students' reading than, say, their colleagues in history or psychology. When you read in science, this teacher observed, every sentence counts. Whereas, he felt, a student may get by with a less detailed kind of reading in other courses. And, he believed, because they can get by, they are less willing to do the kind of "hard" reading required in science courses.

II. Attitudes Expressed about Student Writing

While science teachers were often quite pointed in their criticism of student reading, they were on the whole less critical of student writing than their colleagues in other departments. A prime reason for this would seem to be that they receive less direct evidence in the form of extended composition than, for instance, the social science teacher. "I don't get enough writing from students to make any judgment about," said one science teacher. Because of class size, his students do no writing at all.

Like their colleagues in other departments, science teachers who do receive some writing, in the form of reports in lab manuals or short answer responses on tests, expressed concern about sentence structure and spelling. Two or three others felt that a fundamental problem for students was an inability to develop an idea in sufficient detail. Social science instructors, particularly, were concerned about students' difficulty in writing a coherent and unified essay, developing a generalization through specific evidence and example. This, more than spelling, sentence structure, agreement, or other conventions of good writing, seemed to be the criterion of a satisfactory student essay.

Very few instructors outside the business department consider errors in spelling, grammar or punctuation important enough per se to warrant lowering a grade. In fact, only two instructors (business teachers excepted) indicated unequivocally that they would lower a grade for errors in English. The general attitude seemed to be: If I can understand what he's trying to say, I let it go. Several teachers said that if they really bore down on mechanics half or more of their students would fail. In discussing the implications of this practice, most teachers agreed that emphasis on basic skills was probably a general education problem that deserved further interdepartmental discussion.

III. Writing Requirements and Methods of Evaluation

On the assumption that the social science department probably required more extended formal composition from students than other departments (except English), nine members of that department were interviewed. The range and variety of their writing requirements is worth presenting in some detail.

Instructor A: In Social Science 110-111, to qualify for an "A" or "B" a student must write an essay of about six pages on a topic that is selected in conference with the instructor. Otherwise, no papers are assigned. I asked the instructor why only candidates for an "A" or "B" should be required to write an essay. He replied that he wasn't sure that he could defend the policy but was of the general opinion that the "A" or "B" students were most likely those who would go on to upper division work and therefore needed the discipline of a research paper more than 'terminal' students.

In Anthropology 110, Instructor A requires from all students a paper of 3 to 4 pages in length, descriptive in method, for example describing the characteristics of a culture the student has read about. A standard footnote and bibliography form is required.

Evaluation: Prime criterion: organization of thought.
Instructor A does not grade down for English errors, although an "A" would be given only to a paper that was excellent in every respect.

Instructor B: No papers are required of students in Social Science 110, though it is possible for a student write a paper for extra credit

In Psychology 120, this instructor requires a research paper of no less than three pages from all students.

Evaluation: Organization of thought. Students are not graded down for English errors.

Instructor C: Assigns one outside paper: an essay, book report or research term paper. Estimates that he assigns 2000-3000 words of out of class writing plus essay exams in class.

Evaluation: Organization of thought. Does not grade down for English errors.

Instructor D: Assigns one outside paper in Social Science 110-111, a 1000 word critical analysis of a book.

Evaluation: Organization of thought. Does not grade down for English errors.

Instructor E: In Social Science 110, does not assign a paper. In his sociology class a student must write a term paper to qualify for an "A".

Evaluation: Organization of thought. Does not grade down for English errors.

Instructor F: Assigns no term paper in his geography and California history courses. Students write one page reports on each of two books (on book report form). In California history students complete three project reports on visits. Instructor F estimates that, including mid-term essay exam, student might write 13 to 15 pages during semester.

Evaluation: Organization of thought. Part of project report grade for good English usage.

Instructor G: In U.S. history, students write an essay, maximum three pages, every three weeks on the main ideas in the assigned readings. The intent is to discover what the students are getting out of the readings.

Evaluation: These papers are not graded but checked as a completed assignment.

Assigns term paper for every student. Does not specify the number of words. Students are to identify a problem, state a thesis and defend it. Acceptable footnoting procedure expected.

Evaluation: Organization of thought. Does not grade down for English errors.

Instructor H: In Social Science 111 and in European History, term paper of 3000 words is voluntary, but required to be eligible for an "A".

Evaluation: Organization of thought. Does not grade down for English errors, but will not give "A" unless paper is outstanding in all respects.

Instructor 1: In Psychology 220, assigns every student a term report. Student may write on any subject within scope of the course. Instructor meets with students to decide on subject and check on progress of report. Length: probably not less than 15 pages.

A written journal also required of every student in which he writes "...a minimum of a page of comments and reactions after each class meeting." The intent of the journal is to let the instructor know how the student is responding to events in and out of class, to accustom him to writing and to looking at events in the light of psychological concepts.

Evaluation: Term report evaluated on organization of thought. English errors are neither graded nor identified in the term paper. In mimeographed Course Information provided for students, instructor advises: "The form of the paper is not important. There should be some sort of bibliography listing major references and sources."

Grade on term report a matter of mutual agreement between instructor and student.

Essay Examinations: Every one of these instructors assigns at least one essay examination per semester. Most give two or more. One gives a "self-expression" essay test every two weeks, which is not graded. Another gives a 30 minute or less short answer test every other week.

All the social science teachers interviewed believed that essay exams or a combination of essay and objective exams were superior to objective exams alone. Essay exams are graded by essentially the same criterion-organization of thought-as papers. Essay exams are not graded down for errors in English.

Some Generalizations about Writing Requirements

The writing requirements of these nine instructors are, I would predict, representative of the whole faculty (other than the English department) in at least these respects:

(1) The overwhelming majority of the faculty do not consciously lower a student's grade because of errors in English.

(2) The formal research paper, required of every student in English 122, is required by few instructors outside the English department. (Note the evidence: only two out of nine social science instructors require a term paper of all students in a given course. None of the nine science instructors interviewed requires a term paper. None of five counselors interviewed requires a research paper in Psychology 119. Nor are term papers required by the humanities or music instructors interviewed.

(3) The great majority of instructors in the college require at least some kind of writing on examinations. In fact, only one instructor in the sample reported that he gave only objective examinations. And he did so reluctantly, because of very large classes.

(4) Outside the social science and English departments, relatively few instructors give extended essay exams. That is, an exam in which the student is asked to develop his response to a question to a length of at least several paragraphs. The short answer exam is probably given more frequently than any other kind.

(5) Most instructors would assign more writing if classes were smaller. But, as one music instructor put it, "smaller" would have to be 25 students or less. I suspect most of his colleagues would agree.

(6) All instructors interviewed were unable to make any precise statement about the quantity of writing they required. Apparently only the English department requires a minimum number of words per semester.

(7) Content and organization of thought are the criteria by which the great majority of faculty evaluate papers and essay exams. Style, diction and "mechanics" are not taken into consideration except, with some instructors, when the paper is otherwise eligible for an "A".

(8) Few instructors have thought carefully about the assignment and evaluation of writing as a method of instruction. Few have thought carefully about the relation of writing to the learning process. (The generalization would fit many English teachers as well.) I'm moved to make the point partly because of the exception, Bill DiPace, who has given a great deal of thought to, precisely, the function of writing in the learning process. Several counselors that I talked to use DiPace's "writing process" in their Psychology 119 classes and are enthusiastic about the results. DiPace requested that I not attempt a brief description either of his writing or his study process in this report. Thus, I will say only that it appears to be a most promising innovation, one that, properly conducted, could be of use in a variety of courses.

IV. Reading Assignments: Method Used

As developed earlier in this report, many instructors find students' inability to read for ideas a particularly vexing problem. What assistance do instructors give students?

(1) Two instructors indicated that they regularly prepare study questions on the assigned reading. One instructor, in addition to weekly study questions, said that he had prepared, as a study aid, an outline of the main ideas in the text. (Science teachers frequently use problems at the end of a chapter as a method of re-enforcing what has been read.)

(2) Some instructors indicated that they discuss the organization of the text, point out the glossary and other resources the text may contain, and spend a few minutes demonstrating how to pick out the main ideas from a chapter.

(3) One instructor (in physical science) spends an hour of class time talking about how to read (study) in science.

(4) Bill DiPace's "study process" (see above) is, essentially, a method of reading for ideas. Like his writing process, it seems a promising innovation that faculty generally ought to know about.

(5) Regrettably, it seems that the most common "method" employed is for the teacher to adjust his expectations to the reality (as he sees it) of students' reading deficiencies. This, I suspect, is done in a variety of ways only some of which have been expressed earlier under Teacher Attitudes. For example, don't take the text seriously, substitute lectures for reading, don't test closely on assigned reading.

(6) A "method" that is not used or, generally, even understood is to refer a remedial student to Communication 114, 115 or 116. Few instructors (counselors perhaps excepted) seem to have a clear idea of what these courses are intended to do. Not one instructor indicated that he had ever asked a student to enroll in one of these courses.

V. Recommendations

Reading and writing are general education skills, essential to satisfactory work in many courses in our curriculum. Although instruction in college level reading and writing is primarily the job of the English department, nearly every teacher interviewed

asserted that he shares responsibility for developing these skills.

How to implement that responsibility is the problem. This report concludes with some recommendations toward that end.

1. I would recommend the establishment of an interdepartmental committee on instructional methods and media. The long range task of the committee would be to keep itself and the faculty informed on innovations in instructional technique, especially, but not exclusively, those that are occurring as a result of the "electronic revolution."

The immediate objective of the committee would be to initiate an all-out, campus wide effort to develop the reading and writing capacities of DVC students. These goals would probably intermesh because much that is coming out of the "revolution in teaching" (the title of one book on the subject) has implications for reading and writing instruction.

2. The committee should be composed of an administrator, and interested faculty from a variety of departments (many said that they would be willing to serve on such a committee), including persons who have special knowledge in the field of programmed instruction and electronic media.

3. One idea the committee could explore is the feasibility of an experiment whereby an instructor in, say, Chemistry 108 would require a student with, for example, a spelling problem, to complete a unit of self-instructional work on spelling before he could receive credit for his chemistry course.

This self-instructional work might be accomplished in a "resource materials center" of the kind that Jack Carhart has recently described. (Faculty Association Forum, May 25) I should think it might be possible to staff such a center with teaching assistants: housewives, superior students, etc. They could supervise and certify to the referring instructor that the student had completed a unit of work and was eligible for a grade.

Although it would probably be important to give pre and post tests, I should think that the focus, at least at first, would be on the process of having students complete remedial work in reading or writing in courses outside the English department. This would emphasize that reading and writing are in fact, not just in theory, valued general education skills.

To identify students with remedial problems it would be necessary for participating instructors to give a test early in the semester that would provide evidence about their reading and writing abilities relative to a course in anthropology, biology or whatever. Otherwise this plan should not involve any extra work on the part of the instructor.

4. The success of such a scheme would depend on a resource materials center having the resources. To stimulate development of materials---programs, tapes, video-tapes, computer assisted programs---would be the task of the methods and media committee. Several instructors have indicated an interest in developing programmed materials for the special needs of their students.

There is a considerable variety of programmed material now on the market in many different fields. (See Hendershot's Bibliography of Programs and Presentation Devices).

5. Bringing teachers from different departments together to focus on the common problem of reading and writing might have some productive consequences. Some possibilities to be explored:

(A) The promise inherent in Bill DiPace's writing and study processes should definitely be examined. I would strongly recommend that DiPace or someone familiar with his theory and method be a member, or consultant to, the committee.

(B) Len Stenberg and Joe Bonavito believe that English teachers do not appreciate the contribution that typing can make to fluency and word attack skills. There is, I believe, some research evidence to support their view. And I notice that Hendershot lists "Spelling Drills Programmed for the Typewriter." The business teacher might well have some important ideas to contribute.

(C) Reading and writing are not self-contained activities. They derive from speech and should not be isolated from it. Students need to hear the sound of their own voices reading; they need to hear other people reading good prose, the kind they are expected to read and write in college. Howard Knight takes time in his biology classes to read a Julian Huxley or Rachel Carson so that students can hear the sound of good scientific writing. I should think the speech teacher and the foreign language teacher would both have something to offer here, the former from his experience with oral interpretation methods, the latter from his work with the language laboratory.

Very likely we ought to develop a language laboratory for native students of English with tapes, silent and oral reading and listening exercises, etc. Perhaps, in an experiment, a few instructors might agree to require their students to immerse themselves, through a variety of media, in the language of a subject.

(D) If there is validity in the idea that learning the vocabulary of a discipline (see biology teacher's remark earlier in report) is similar to learning the vocabulary of a foreign language, the methods of the foreign language teacher might be of some use in teaching the vocabulary of physics or social science. At any rate, the idea should be explored.

There is still more. But the main point right now is that the need is evident; it is widely felt among faculty and the interest is high. If we dare to cooperate and experiment, we might discover that we know more than we've ever imagined about the teaching of reading and writing. We might even learn some things about the meaning of a general education.

- - - Wendell Johnson